

Candidates stand at dividend divide

Begich and Dunleavy offer differing approaches to Permanent Fund in final debate before election

By JAMES BROOKS
JUNEAU.EMPIRE

The Alaska Permanent Fund wasn't physically present, but it shared the stage with Alaska's two leading candidates for governor in their final debate for the general election.

Mark Begich and Mike Dunleavy used the hour-long event hosted by KTVA-TV to share their

opinions on crime and on the fund. The candidates' plans for the fund differ sharply and are some of the biggest differences between the two.

"Alaska is at a turning

point, a crossroads," Dunleavy said.

In the debate, he said he would seek to restore the traditional formula for distributing the Permanent Fund Dividend and would retroactively compensate Alaskans for prior cuts. Incumbent Gov. Bill Walker vetoed half the 2016 Permanent Fund

Dividend, and the Alaska Legislature cut it in 2017 and 2018.

Dunleavy said Thursday night that he will pay Alaskans that money using approximately \$6 billion from the Permanent Fund's earnings reserve. While most of the \$64 billion fund is constitutionally protected and cannot

be spent without a vote of the people, \$17 billion of its total is in the earnings reserve account, an unprotected portion that can be spent with a majority vote in the Legislature.

Dunleavy proposes taking \$6 billion from that unprotected earnings reserve

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CLOSE TO HOME

Juneau man hikes country's three major trails

Jeff Sauer completes 'Triple Crown' of hiking

By ALEX MCCARTHY
JUNEAU.EMPIRE

There's a saying among the hiking community that "ounces add up to pounds," in reference to gear they're carrying.

Retired Juneau lawyer Jeff Sauer knows all about that. He also knows that steps add up to miles, and for him, those add up to more than 7,500 miles across the country's three most renowned trails: the Appalachian, Continental Divide and Pacific Crest trails.

This summer, Sauer became one of just under 400 certified hikers to complete all three trails, which he's done over a span of more than 30 years. Each of the trails is longer than 2,000 miles, he said, and he's walked with numerous people, including friends, strangers and his wife Theresa Svancara.

He's picked up wisdom along the way, from how to pack lightly to how to mentally and physically prepare for the treks — and the tumbles.

"Everybody falls down," Sauer said. "If you're going to walk 2,000 miles, you're going to trip over something and fall down. It's inevitable."

Sauer will share some of that wisdom at the Juneau Audubon Society's meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday at the University of Alaska Southeast. He believes he's the first person in Juneau to hike all three trails — known as the Triple Crown.

The American Long

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Above, Jeff Sauer stops for a view in Shenandoah National Park in Virginia on the Appalachian Trail in 2010.

Left, Retired attorney Jeff Sauer talks on Tuesday, Oct. 30, 2018, about completing the Triple Crown of long-distance hiking trail in the United States. The Triple Crown include the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail.

State proposes fix for rape evidence kit backlog

Department of Public Safety asks to hire four new staff at crime lab

By JAMES BROOKS
JUNEAU.EMPIRE

The Alaska Department of Public Safety has a plan and money to test thousands of shelved evidence kits from sexual assaults, and it's now proposing a way to make sure none are ever shelved again.

On Friday, the department released its annual report on the number of untested sexual assault evidence kits, colloquially known as rape kits. Statewide, the report lists 2,568 untested and shelved kits, with 7 percent coming from the Juneau Police Department. That's down from 3,484 shelved kits last year.

While the state has enough money to test those shelved kits, it is worried

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Begich talks Juneau issues

Democratic governor candidate visits Juneau in last stop before election

By JAMES BROOKS
JUNEAU.EMPIRE

Shaking hands and talking to potential voters in Sacred Grounds Café on Friday afternoon, Mark Begich was interrupted by the booming voice of Tlingit and Haida President Richard Peterson.

The Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska hasn't endorsed a governor candidate this year, but Peterson had no problem offering his personal support.

"I'm honored to say I personally endorse Mark Begich ... and thank him for stepping forward," Peterson told the crowded room.

Four days before the general election, Alaska's Democratic candidate for governor stopped in Juneau and went on a walk along Channel Drive with the Juneau Empire to discuss Juneau-specific issues. Two months ago, Begich appeared on stage in a debate hosted by the Juneau Chamber of Commerce.

Since then, one of the three men on that stage has dropped out of the race, and

the contest between Begich and Republican candidate Mike Dunleavy has grown much closer. While the race has changed, Begich's views haven't.

Juneau Access and Second Crossing

He said he still would not restart the effort to build a road north from Juneau. When asked about the remaining money from the Juneau Access Project, he said he would like to keep it in Juneau.

"There's been a lot of talk about the second bridge, which seems to be more compatible in the sense of what people are interested

in, and that interests me," he said. "You know, that's a good project and probably easier to build."

He said that's not a certainty; he'd want to hear from the community first.

The Alaska Marine Highway System

Without a road north, what would the ferry system look like under a Begich administration?

"It's going to be treated like (hard surface) highways. And the first thing is, I don't support the idea of modeling it like the (Alaska) Railroad," Begich said.

Two years ago, Southeast Conference (the regional economic development organization for Southeast) signed an agreement with the administration of Gov. Bill Walker to create a new long-term strategic plan for the ferry system.

The result of that agreement is the Alaska Marine Highway Reform Project, an approach that looks to the Alaska Railroad as a model and envisions an independent ferry authority. Rep. Sam Kito III, D-Juneau, introduced legislation along those lines this year, but the measure did not advance.

Why does Begich oppose that approach?

"Because the railroad is a profit-making entity and therefore it can sustain all the elements of this idea," Begich said.

Climate change and LG-BTQ rights

Begich has a three-part climate-change plan on his website, but when asked what his administration would do beyond that plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Alaska, he referred back to the plan, explaining how energy efficiency measures in new construction would reduce the need for central heating.

Statewide debates have tended to focus on economic issues rather than social issues, so the Empire asked whether his administration would push for antidiscrimination protections for LG-BTQ Alaskans.

"With your own workforce, I think you can have control over (that); I don't

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Distance Hiking Association-West tracks the names of those who have done it but does not track demographic information, ALDHA-West Secretary Kate Hoch said. She said there are at least a couple others from Alaska, but the organization doesn't have a record of exactly who.

Sauer's trek began in 1985, when he was 30 and quit his job as a public defender in Kenai with an eye on finishing the Pa-

cific Crest Trail. The Tides, a publication in Kenai, wrote a story about his ambitious goal of hiking the whole trail that summer.

"I sat down with the paper there, which I was a little apprehensive about, because this was before I hiked," Sauer remembers. "Like, 'Geez, what if I completely bomb out?'"

That didn't end up being a problem. He did the whole 2,600 miles or so of the trail that summer, and then came back to Alaska to continue his law career.

In the early 2000s, Sauer began hiking the Continental Divide Trail in sections. Sauer then hiked the entirety of the Appala-

chian Trail in the summer of 2010 before hitting the CDT hard starting in 2014. He's returned to the CDT every year since then, finishing the final 400 miles this summer. Svancara did more than 1,000 miles of the CDT alongside her husband.

The Juneau hiking community is extremely active, and Sauer said he's far from the only one who has undertaken these long hikes.

In fact, it might not be long before another Juneauite completes the Triple Crown. Pat Murphy is 646 miles away from joining Sauer.

Murphy's interest in long-distance hiking be-

gan with a National Geographic article in 1970. He and his wife Anne have hiked all over the world, but he didn't start on the Triple Crown until 1997. Murphy, 75, has been walking sections of the trails since then with Anne and with their son Erik Lindbeck.

Murphy hasn't been able to hike for the past couple years, but hopes to return to the CDT next summer.

"It's an amazing accomplishment," Murphy said of Sauer finishing the Triple Crown. "It's a pretty cool thing."

Sauer and Murphy can tell stories for hours about their adventures on the

trails. There was a time in Wyoming when Murphy was out of water and happened to run into a man on horseback herding sheep who gave him water. There was a time on the Appalachian Trail when one of Sauer's friends fell in a river and Sauer and another friend took an extra second to take a photograph of the fallen friend before helping him out.

The Appalachian Trail has become incredibly popular among hikers young and old, Sauer said. "It's like a college dorm moving 20 miles a day," Sauer said.

Other memorable moments came when Sauer was all on his own. He re-

membered a spring day on the Appalachian Trail when he came to a point where flower petals covered the trail ahead of him. He stopped in his tracks, taken by the beauty of what was in front of him.

He ended up taking a couple steps off the trail and walking around, not wanting to disturb the scene. Moments like that are some of the more meaningful memories, he said.

"There's just this freedom of being out there, self-contained, getting away from all the distraction and noisiness of the world and just walking," Sauer said.

FIX:

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about the problem recurring: The crime lab doesn't have enough manpower to test every new kit that comes in its doors.

To fix the issue, this year's report recommends the state "create a dedicated sexual assault analysis team." Doing so will cost an estimated \$700,500 per year. That money will hire four new forensic scientists and pay for the chemicals and equipment they need to do the job.

The request has been submitted from the department to the governor's office and could be part of the governor's budget request next month. If it appears in that request, the Alaska Legislature would have the final say.

Kits consist of physical evidence taken from the body of a sexual assault victim following an assault. Kits may go untested for a variety of reasons, such as when the identity of a perpetrator is already known and doesn't need to be established by DNA.

In recent years, Alaska and other states have taken greater interest in testing all kits: As the theory goes, evidence from untested kits could be used to identify serial rapists or link a perpetrator in a known case to one in an unknown case.

In 2016, under instructions from Gov. Bill Walker, the Department of Public Safety applied for (and received) a \$1.5 million grant to test kits in the custody of the Alaska State Troopers. Five hundred and seventy-seven of those have been sent to a private lab for testing. The state has also used federal grant money to hire a cold-case investigator to examine the results of the testing and a prosecutor to deal with the cases that result from those investigations.

The grant-funded program only dealt with kits in the custody of the state, not those in the hands of the state's many municipal police departments. In 2017, the Alaska Legislature passed Senate Bill 55, which required the state to inventory all untested kits statewide. That report revealed 3,484, mostly in the custody of the Anchorage Police Department. The same report estimated it would cost between \$2.2 million and \$3 million to test all of those kits.

In response, the Alaska Legislature earlier this year appropriated \$2.75 million to cover testing. Again, the state crime lab lacks the resources to process those kits atop its normal work, so they are being sent to a private lab on the East Coast for testing.

Testing all of the shelved kits is expected to take several years. While the first results will arrive by March 2019, the last will not come until 2021.

While that grant will take care of all shelved kits (except for a handful of rare instances), the crime lab is still receiving more kits than it can handle in a given year, and not all new kits are earmarked for testing. Given enough time, the problem of shelved kits will return.

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